

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 297 341

CS 211 401

AUTHOR Colomb, Gregory G.
TITLE Where Should Students Start Writing in the Disciplines?
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (39th, St. Louis, MO, March 17-19, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cues; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; *Interdisciplinary Approach; *Writing Across the Curriculum; Writing Evaluation; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Academic Discourse Communities; Academic Language; *Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

A mistake is made when writing is taught as though what students learn in one discipline (usually English) can simply be carried forward unchanged to any number of different writing situations and tasks, and when linear metaphors are used to describe the processes of learning such a "basic skill" as writing. The slogan of every writing across the curriculum program should be that grammar changes from discipline to discipline. These variations occur at every level of text structure, from syntax through global discourse structure, and they occur in ways that are miscellaneous and unpredictable. The dominant grammatical feature of student-produced texts is that these texts make points, but where and how points can be made, and even what counts as a point worth making, changes from discipline to discipline. The metaphors that are commonly used to describe learning are linear and based on natural development and growth. Better metaphors are ones involving an "outsider" trying to get into an "interpretive" community. If new students are thought of as novices and if the goal of writing instruction is to make them socialized members of a community of knowers, learners, and teacher, then a better understanding can be had of teaching the social activity that is called writing. If writing is best learned in the disciplines, then maybe it is there that all writing teachers ought to be. (Eleven references are attached.) (RS)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Gregory G. Colomb

Where Should Students Start Writing in the Disciplines?

Gregory G. Colomb
Department of English
Georgia Institute of Technology
Atlanta, GA, 30332

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

Presented at the Conference on College Communication and Composition
March 19, 1988
St. Louis, MO

With writing across the curriculum programs increasingly popular, it is something of a cliché to assert that writing is a social activity whose contours respond to the social circumstances within which one writes. So familiar is this theme that there was a session yesterday morning whose topic was writing as a social process and whose title asked not, Do we believe it?, but, "Do we really mean it this time?" This afternoon I want to talk about what it means to "really mean it." There are consequences to really meaning it, many of which we are only beginning to understand. I will focus on the curricular consequences of taking seriously what we have begun to understand about the social activity of writing, and take a look at the costs, especially the costs for the first-year writing course.

To focus on the social aspects of writing has meant, in recent years, to speak of interpretive communities. The term has become increasingly common — one can hardly attend a session at this conference without hearing it — and it is, to my mind, much abused. A development of the basic linguistic notion of a language or dialect community, the notion of an interpretive community has informed the best contemporary thinking about language and meaning, at least since Wittgenstein. The composition community seems to have borrowed the specific term from Stanley Fish (1980), and what was in Fish a loose notion has become an almost incoherent one. We hear about all kinds of interpretive communities — the community of educated citizens, of academe, of particular colleges, even of particular classrooms, not to mention any other community to which we or our students might be said to belong. I have begun to suspect that "interpretive community" crops up whenever we have no better support for our views. But in nature, interpretive communities don't just crop up in order to engage in a little free-lance interpretation. They are interpretive communities because they are *communities*, with all the ideological, economic, political, material, linguistic moral, and

other determinants of communal life. College students participate in and must deal with a number of communities, but the ones that most define the college experience are the disciplines, with all of their ideological, linguistic and other determinants of communal life. These disciplinary communities are the locus of social action on which I will focus today.

There are two areas in which the role of disciplinary communities is especially significant for the writing curriculum. One concerns grammar, and one concerns learning. Of the two areas, our conception of grammar is probably the more affected by a thoroughly social model of the writing process. We cannot have our old compositional grammars under the social model (see Colomb and Turner, 1988), and the theoretical fallout of holding a non-compositional grammar is great. Today, I will focus on the ways that grammar changes as students move from one disciplinary community to another. In the area of learning theory, the social model poses important questions for how we think about cognitive development. Today, I will focus on how we think and talk about learning with respect to those disciplinary communities.

My point concerning grammar is what should be the slogan of every program in writing across the curriculum — or, as I prefer, writing in the disciplines — namely, that grammar changes from discipline to discipline. These disciplinary variations occur at every level of text structure, from syntax through global discourse structure, and they occur in ways that, while they may be motivated, are nevertheless miscellaneous and unpredictable. For example, in the kinds of texts we normally ask students to produce, the dominant grammatical feature at the level of global discourse structure is that these texts make points. Discourse points are often called theses or claims, but those are only a type of point, which is a broader, more general feature. Although discourse points are the dominant grammatical feature of our students' texts (this is an *invariant* grammatical feature), where and how points can be made changes from discipline to discipline. More importantly, what counts as a point worth making changes from discipline to discipline.

Let me share with you a story about the consequences of the disciplinary variations in points. It begins some seven years ago and centers on a University of Chicago student I taught in the first and third quarter of her year-long humanities common core, one of four common core sequences taken by all Chicago undergraduates. Although not primarily a composition course, the humanities sequence was then the only place where new students received any significant instruction in writing.

Like many other Chicago undergraduates, this was one of those students who seem to blossom in the first year. A wonderfully bright young woman from rural Kansas, she had every success — and no significant criticism — in high school, but she found college a very different affair. Barely a month into her first quarter, she found the new difficulties of college overwhelming: "I have to go back to Kansas," she told me. "I was happy there. I got all A's there." Explaining her difficulties, she spoke of herself as another Dorothy and of the University of Chicago as a frightening Oz, where others did by magic what she did only badly and only with struggle. By the end of her first year, that was no

longer so. Perhaps not the very best writer in her class, she was nevertheless more than competent, a clear A student and a happy citizen of her new Oz.

The next fall, Dorothy came to see me again, feeling betrayed: once again she was ready to flee to Kansas. She had just gotten back her second essay in a social science common core class. She was upset by the grade — her second C in a class where C was the punishment grade; but what upset her most was that her roommate had received an A on a paper she had written in less than two hours by leafing through the assigned text, typing sentences more or less verbatim from the text, and providing a little personal filler here and there. I looked at my student's C essay. Though not up to her best work, it seemed written well enough. She had covered all the necessary points, she assured me, had even checked her paper against her roommate's. How, she asked me, how had she failed? She had taken the trouble to write what seemed to her — and to me — a well-crafted essay, and she got a C for her trouble.

Dorothy's case is a classic, an all-too-familiar instance of how students encounter disciplinary variations in grammar. She had written an essay that would have been perfectly acceptable the year before. She had kept her grip not only on the writing skills but also on the disciplinary skills I had taught her. She had produced a creditable piece of writing — which was graded a C. Her writing was "fuzzy," the comment said; she did not "cover the territory." If we assume that her professor was even marginally competent and that she did, as she said, "cover all the points" — or at least covered enough of them to do better than a C — then we must find the reason for that C somewhere in the difference in the disciplines.

Though the differences were several, the main difference concerned points, which had been the chief focus of her writing instruction in that first humanities class. Since students do not come to college well-prepared on this score, we spent most of that class reforming our students' notion of what counts as a point worth making in the collegiate community of humanistic study. Most students, even the better-prepared students, begin by making points that seem to their professors both too general and too thin. Dorothy's first full assignment was to compare and contrast two speeches that Thucydides had made up for his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The speeches are supposedly given by representatives of Corcyra and Corinth, each bidding for Athens to join them in an alliance against the other. Though the topic is rich with opportunities for analysis, this is a poor assignment that invites characteristic novice responses from new students — deliberately so, in order to raise the question of points right from the start.

Most of Dorothy's colleagues, as first-year students everywhere, find it difficult to reach beyond "mere summary" to analysis. They begin with points like those that begin the following list, points that are not yet rich enough to count as points worth making.

- 1) The Corcyraeans' and the Corinthians' speeches are different.
- 2) In the speeches, the Corinthians appeal to virtue while the Corcyraeans appeal to self interest.

- 3) In these speeches and their different appeals, Thucydides shows how Athens made wartime decisions.
- 4) In these speeches and their different appeals, Thucydides shows how Athens had already begun its steady decline.
- 5) In these speeches and their different appeals, Thucydides lets the reader understand why Athens had already begun its steady decline.
- 6) In these speeches and their different appeals, the reader not only understands but also can begin to experience the beliefs and attitudes that had already started Athens on its steady decline.

The first two on the list do not count as points worth making in the collegiate community of the humanities because neither makes a judgment that is not obvious to every attentive reader (although on that score the second greatly improves the first). Students who do better learn to make points such as three or four, which are above the threshold of points worth making (although here too the second is better because the range of its judgment is wider). These points present the kind of interpretive judgments that are expected in the humanities: although there is no absolute rule, points worth making in the humanities tend to have the author or a surrogate for the author as the subject/agent and a verb that is not a verb of saying.¹ Students who have already "gotten it," that is, who have begun to master the discipline, make points like five. This point introduces a third player, the reader, who is added to the mix of Thucydides and the Athenians. Students need significantly greater sophistication to manage a three-term judgment, even one as simple as this. Finally, the students who are destined for graduate school make points like number six, which is five elaborated with lit crit lingo.

Students in this kind of introductory course must learn what counts as a point worth making, what counts as support for a point, and why. So, Dorothy's class had spent much of that first year learning how to climb up this point ladder, how to write papers that could successfully make and support increasingly rich points. Dorothy's problem, however, was that those rules no longer obtained in her social sciences' class, which had a very different standard of "richness." This was the secret that Dorothy's roommate understood and that Dorothy and I did not.² She understood what counted as a point worth making in the collegiate community of inquiry in the social sciences. In the wake of this experience, I investigated the situation. Discussions with teachers in the social science core revealed that they expect points that do repeat what an author has said. The kind of points they require also demand a judgment on the part of the student — what the professors most often called a "response," but they are much closer to paraphrase than are the kind of interpretive points expected in the humanities. Teachers in the humanities core had spent

¹The disciplinary patterns I discuss here are by no means monolithic. The humanities common core at the University of Chicago is dominated by language departments. As a result, even though it is conceived as a general humanities course, the standards enforced in the course tend to be weighted toward the practice of language departments. What I say here about points would not be true of the small variant of the course offered exclusively by the philosophy department, whose standards are quite different.

²See Faigley and Hansen (1985) for an anecdotal account of the writing difficulties faced by advanced social science students who have not yet mastered their discipline.

the year weaning students away from that practice. Is it any wonder that in the new setting many of them got it wrong?

I have so far focused on the matter of points, but the disciplinary variations that students face run the gamut of grammatical features at *all* levels of text structure. Moreover, the cues that teachers use to judge the quality of students' texts are often extremely subtle. I have the next example from a teacher who found himself in the grip of such subtle grammatical cues. (Let me add that I have included only examples from the humanities because I presume that is where most of us live. Examples from other disciplines are as numerous and as striking.)

One day a colleague pulled me into his office as I was walking by, and handed me the paper he had been grading. "Why is it," he asked, "that I know this paper has to get an A even though I've read only the first paragraph." The course was an upper-level course in seventeenth-century poetry; the assignment was to produce a three-page reading of a poem not yet discussed in class; the student's name was Leslie. Her opening paragraph read,

Donne's "A Lecture upon the Shadow" gently admonishes his lover to maintain the honesty and integrity implicit in their relationship lest they should come to deceive themselves as they had the lovers in their separate pasts. The poem is in two sections, each tightly defined by rhyme scheme and line length (see attached). The first is primarily a metaphoric history of their past relationships, in which the shadow speaks for both the insubstantial, though haunting quality of the past and their deliberate deception of previous lovers. Donne then tells us that past behavior no longer applies, and thereby implies his current relationship is everything the previous ones were not: mature; complete; emotionally honest. With an eye toward preserving this newfound purity, the second section moves into the future and prescribes against the disingenuousness of the first.

The opening couplet of the first section establishes Donne's seriousness

(If your discipline is not literary criticism and my colleague's judgment seems incomprehensible to you, then you are feeling something of what these disciplinary variations do to students.)

My first response was to point out that this prose is quite accomplished for an undergraduate. The paragraph has a complex structure that is yet orderly and unobtrusive. Its sentences are of varied length, and the longer ones have different kinds of syntactic complexity. Only accomplished writers demonstrate the patience and the syntactic dexterity of the post-posed adjectives in the penultimate sentence. Leslie even knows enough to make the three post-posed adjectives move from short to long, to make the first two identical in meter, and to give an iambic pattern to the whole: "mature, complete, emotionally honest." (I refrained then from noting that each adjective is dominated by an initial "m" sound and a final "t.") This explanation was immediately rejected. My colleague did not think I had captured his sense of what he felt, and he professed to have other students who wrote prose at least as sophisticated but whose papers had not affected him in the same way.

The answer does, I think, lie partly in the sophistication of the prose, but it lies even more in a series of disciplinary cues. I have now tested this passage informally on hun-

dreds of teachers of literature. Asked to predict what grade they would give to a paper that begins with this paragraph, all but a well-defined minority (of which more in a moment) agree with my colleague: this paper has to get an A. I have also tested the following paragraph on a somewhat smaller number of teachers:

"Come with me and be my love . . ." What lover of poetry has not been thrilled by words like these? Love has always been one of the most durable and exciting appeals that poetry makes on its readers. Love is certainly one of the most important sources of appeal in the poetry of John Donne, although sometimes the love in question is love of God. Unlike other love poets, however, John Donne tries to use argument to make his lovers love him. Donne's "A Lecture upon the Shadow" is a poem that makes an argument. In this poem, Donne gently admonishes his lover to maintain the honesty and integrity implicit in their relationship lest they should come to deceive themselves as they had the lovers in their separate pasts. The poem has two sections. Each section has the same rhyme scheme and stanza structure. In each section, Donne has one long stanza (aabbcddeeee) with varied line length (in syllables, the lines run 6, 10, 7, 7, 10, 10, 6, 10, 8, 8, 10) and a closing couplet. The first section is a primarily a history of their past relationships told in metaphors. In this section the shadow spe. for both the insubstantial, though haunting quality of the past and their deliberate deception of previous lovers. Donne then tells us that past behavior no longer applies. Thereby he implies his current relationship is everything the previous ones were not: mature; complete; emotionally honest. With an eye toward preserving this newfound purity, the second section moves into the future. In it Donne prescribes against the disingenuousness of the first section.

The opening couplet of the first section shows that Donne is serious . . .

Asked to predict the grade of this paper, teachers agree less, but none find it a clear A paper and some rate it a D or even F.

The differences in these two passages demonstrate what created the sense of compulsion that my colleague felt about the original passage. These differences isolate a series of grammatical and other textual cues of the student's mastery of the discipline. Every sentence in the original is included in the revision (although some complex sentences are made simpler). So student B knows everything about Donne and his poem that student A did. But student B does not know how to present that knowledge in accord with the appropriate disciplinary conventions.

One such convention is found in the grammar of introductions. One grammatical function of introductions is to put on the table those concepts which are to serve as nodal points in the structure of information that will form a basis of the text's coherence.³ The set of those concepts, in turn, helps to create an image of the writer and of a possible reader. In academic writing, readers use that opening set of concepts to gauge the degree of specialized knowledge that a text will demand of its readers: too much for the reader, and the text will seem (and so will be) unintelligible; too little, and the text will seem uninformative. Also relevant to this judgment is the speed with which those concepts are announced, especially the kind of information that is presented in the first sentence or two. For example, the engineer who made the following two sentences the whole of his

³Coherence is, of course, not a grammatical feature but a feature of our response to texts. Texts are coherent when a given reader is able to construct from it a coherent understanding. There are, however, grammatical features that contribute to readers' coherent understandings. One way to think of those features is as instructions to the reader for finding coherence.

introduction offers an image of himself and his reader that excludes all but a few specialists from entering into a transaction with the text:

Introduction

Fluid-film forces in squeeze-film dampers (SFD) have nearly been always obtained from the Reynolds equation of classical lubrication theory. However, the increase and size of rotating machinery and the use of light viscosity oils have brought the need to include fluid inertia effects in the analysis and design of SFDs.

On the other hand, the engineer who wrote this slower introduction offers an image of a more expansive writer and readership:

Introduction

One of the more promising methods of protecting downstream migrating juvenile fish at hydroelectric power developments is diversion by screening in the turbine intakes. The method consists of suspending a screen in the intake water passage-way to direct the fish toward and into a gate well for subsequent collection and release downstream of the dam. . . . [80 words]

Since the efficiency of the fish screens is determined by the interaction of the fish behavior and the hydraulic flow conditions, a new screen design can be evaluated to a certain extent by determining the hydraulic performance of the screens. . . . [40 words] The study resulted in a better understanding of the hydraulic features of the technique, which can be a guide for future designs.

Returning to the Donne papers, we can see that in the original the student begins rather quickly: "Donne's 'A Lecture upon the Shadow' gently admonishes his lover to maintain the honesty and integrity implicit in their relationship lest they should come to deceive themselves as they had the lovers in their separate pasts." Because it is first, this sentence conveys a great deal of information. Not only does it offer a quick reading of the central theme of the poem, but it also presupposes significant knowledge of Donne's poetry, of metaphysical poetry in general, even of some central strains in the history of love poetry. This introduction knows a lot that it does not say, and so projects an image of the transaction between reader and writer that makes them more peers than student and teacher. Compare how long it takes the revised version to get to the same point, how much more information the revised version thinks it must put on the table explicitly:

"Come with me and be my love . . ." What lover of poetry has not been thrilled by words like these? Love has always been one of the most durable and exciting appeals that poetry makes on its readers. Love is certainly one of the most important sources of appeal in the poetry of John Donne, although sometimes the love in question is love of God. Unlike other love poets, however, John Donne tries to use argument to make his lovers love him. Donne's "A Lecture upon the Shadow" is a poem that makes an argument. In this poem, Donne gently admonishes his lover to maintain the honesty and integrity implicit in their relationship lest they should come to deceive themselves as they had the lovers in their separate pasts.

If the original first sentence confines itself to speaking to the community of literary critics, what community does the revised first sentence address? — certainly a rather larger community, one that would include my young daughters, for example, and that does not bespeak any special disciplinary mastery. Many of the teachers on whom I have tested this passage have found it hard to get beyond these first few lines. Any student who could write this, they rightly judge, cannot have "gotten it."

The two passages have other corresponding differences. Whenever I recognized a strong disciplinary cue in the original, I changed it in the revision. One more example will suffice. A definitive feature of the apprentice genre of this paper (the brief close reading) is that the paper must offer an interpretation of the poem and that interpretation must be grounded in a prior, but largely unspoken formal analysis of the poem. Any interpretation that ignores the formal structures of the poem will be suspect, and an interpretation that runs counter to the formal structure will have to offer some compelling explanation for doing so. Students who have only just begun to understand the genre recognize the necessity for the formal analysis, but find themselves compelled to instantiate that analysis in their papers. Thus they speak the analysis which should be unspoken, and never quite get around to any substantial interpretation. (This is a relatively advanced version of the familiar pattern of novice papers that are more summary than analysis.)

This student has produced a perfect apprentice response to this requirement of the genre: "The poem is in two sections, each tightly defined by rhyme scheme and line length (see attached)." She recognizes the necessity of the formal analysis and the necessity that it be unspoken, but she does not trust herself to show or her professor to recognize that she has in fact met the requirement. So she includes as an appendix the pages of analysis that a student less versed in the discipline would have stuffed into the paper itself. The revised version, on the other hand, converts this apprentice gesture into a novice gesture by spelling out the formal analysis in the crudest possible terms: "In each section, Donne has one long stanza (aabbcddeeee) with varied line length (in syllables, the lines run 6, 10, 7, 7, 10, 10, 6, 10, 8, 8, 10) and a closing couplet." Many of those teachers who got past the opening sentences found themselves stymied by this. A student who could write this could not, they felt sure, write a paper of any quality.

What about that minority of respondents who did not like what they saw in the original? Their response further confirms the main point, that our judgments of writing and thinking are tied to these kinds of subtle disciplinary cues. The minority view finds the original lacking precisely because it seems to have so thoroughly mastered the discipline: its disciplinary ease seems to them a sign of the BS artist, the student who is not thinking but only going through the motions. This is, notice, a difference not so much in judging the quality of the paper as in deciding how to deal with students who have already become socialized into the discipline. There is not, for instance, a corresponding minority who especially like the revised version. There is, however, a smaller minority who praise the revised version when it is further revised to include crude and incorrect syntax.⁴ Taking the cruder prose as a sign of the student's struggle with the material,

⁴"Come with me and be my love . . ." What lover of poetry has not been thrilled by words like these? Love has always been one of the most long-lasting and exciting appeals that poetry makes on its readers. Love is one of the most appealing things about the poems of John Donne, although sometimes he writes about God's love rather than a woman's love. Unlike other poets who write about love, however, John Donne tries to use argument to make his lovers love him. Donne's "A Lecture upon the Shadow" is a poem that is an argument. In this poem, Donne gently admonishes his lover. He tells her to keep their relationship honest so that they won't deceive themselves like they deceived the lovers in their separate pasts. The poem has two sections. Each section has the same rhyme scheme and stanza structure. In each section, Donne has one

these teachers are more likely to notice how much of the original's understanding of the poem has been preserved in the revision. Though they do not predict A's, this group sees the crude version as a sign of a student who is beginning to learn, beginning to get it.

My colleague agreed, at least in part, with the minority view. When he showed me the original paper he had already written two comments in the margins. The first, about halfway down the first paragraph read, "Good, though I'm not so sure about the second part." The second, at the end of the first paragraph read, "NO! — you are mapping 'Good Morrow' onto 'Lecture' too much." My colleague had recognized that this student was doing what successful students in literature classes learn to do fairly early in the game. She had lifted the abstract structure of the professor's reading of one Donne poem and placed it over the new poem, changing only the necessary details. Learning to do this is a part of what it means to learn to be a literary critic. (In cynical moments, I suspect that about half of all critical articles are only more sophisticated versions of the same procedure.) For my colleague, who knew the student, this was a sign of that student's success. For some others, who saw only the paper, it smelled of BS. This is less a difference in their judgment of the paper than it is a difference in their sense of the student.

We make no small mistake when we teach writing as though what students learn in one discipline (almost always English) can simply be carried forward to any number of different writing situations and tasks. Grammar varies from discipline to discipline, and it varies in any number of ways. Dorothy's essay failed partly because it had the wrong kind of point, but also because it failed to meet others of the professor's disciplinary grammatical expectations. Leslie's paper succeeded, partly because it had the right kind of point (though a point that made a claim the teacher did not accept), but also because in a myriad of ways Leslie displayed her mastery of disciplinary conventions, grammatical and otherwise. These variations range through all levels of text structure. In points, we see variations at the highest levels, but the variations also extend down to the lowest: for example, the verb tense used to report what happens in another text.⁵ When students move from discipline to discipline, they find crucial, usually unpredictable changes not only in what counts as *good* writing but in what counts as writing in the first place. These are the kinds of variation that led my English colleague to prefer Leslie's paper to her classmates' and that led my social science colleague to find Dorothy's essay vaguely unintelligible, and so fatally "fuzzy."

long stanza (aabbcdccccc) with lines of different lengths (in syllables, the lines run 6,10,7,7,10,10,6,10,8,8,10) and a closing couplet. The first section is primarily the history of their past relationships, using lots of metaphors. In this section the shadow symbolizes the insubstantial, though haunting quality of the past and the way they deliberately deceived previous lovers. Donne then says that past behavior no longer applies. Thereby he implies his current relationship is mature, complete, and emotionally honest in a way that the previous ones were not. Looking to preserve this newfound purity, the second section moves into the future. In it Donne warns his lover against the dishonesty of the first section.

⁵Some disciplines, including most in the humanities, report what happens in another text in the present tense; others, including several in the social sciences, use the past tense. Others use both: students in biology are encouraged to use the present tense to report well-established findings (since, as established findings, they are part of present and enduring knowledge) and to use the past to report their own and other findings still open to question.

My second general point, and the second advance in our understanding, concerns how we think about such cases. Specifically, it concerns the theory of learning underlying the pedagogy that produces such examples and such responses. Notice for example that a curriculum in which Dorothy is explicitly taught writing only once, in the humanities common core, assumes not only that writing is somehow the special preserve of the humanities but also that writing is the kind of skill that can be learned once and for all — that writing is, as we say, a *basic* skill. That assumption governed not only the structure of Dorothy's curriculum, but also the attitudes of both Dorothy and her social sciences professor — that is why they responded as they did: he by blaming her (and, of course, me) because she didn't already know what she had never been taught and she by blaming herself.

There is a common thread in all our thinking about learning, especially learning such "generic" skills such as writing, reading, and thinking. That common thread is a linear developmental model of learning. The influence of this linear model is amply evident in our best current work in developmental theory — by such members of the Piagetian school as Perry and Kohlberg, for example.⁶ But perhaps the most compelling evidence is found in the cultural metaphors — think of them as embodying a deeply entrenched meta-theory or proto-theory — metaphors which underlie all our talk about teaching and learning.

Notice the linear, construction metaphors we use to talk about basic skills. The job of the teacher at "earlier" levels, we say, is to help the student master the "basic" skills that would then form the "base" or "foundation" on which the student would "build" higher skills. If the foundation is "solid," the job of later teachers is to "reinforce" and "maintain" those basic skills as students solidify their grip on ever-higher levels.

The metaphors we characteristically use to describe learning are also linear, based on natural development and growth. When we develop normally, we grow "up." Growing up, we also "progress" left to right along a time scale (under the metaphor of reaching a "goal"). So we map growth and learning from low to high and map progress from a starting point on the left to a goal on the right. Thus, if we think learning is continuous, we envision the steady curve of a rising hill. If we think learning has stages, we see stairs, with an occasional landing on which students dally or rest, priming themselves for the continuing trek upward.

These linear metaphors further shape how we talk when we and our students fail. Any movement not along the line is regression, and regression is in this view bad and blamable. Students who cannot continue to perform at levels reached earlier are said to have moved backwards, to a lower level. They have failed to learn the bas(e)ics and have fallen, as though they had not advanced at all. If we can, we like to blame this regression on the student's previous teachers. (That's one reason why the business of freshman

⁶See Piaget (1954), Inhelder and Piaget (1958, 1964), Perry (1970), and Kohlberg (1984). Even dissenting views, such as Bilenkey et al. (1986) with their emphasis on the connectedness of student learning, include strong elements of the linear conception of learning.

composition is so little respected.) When we can't find a teacher to blame, we brand the student a backslider who has become careless or forgetful or just plain lazy.

In recent years we have begun to see the need to discard such linear, developmental conceptions of learning. Better than the metaphors of growth and construction is the equally familiar one of an "outsider" trying to "get into" a community, a metaphor that pictures the movement of a learner at first situated outside a bounded field, who then enters and so "joins" the community by acting like its members. Where the stair-step model leaves the student a solitary sojourner, giving no place for a teacher (or anyone else) to stand, the community model puts us in the middle of the learning process, centering on the interaction of student and teacher and measuring learning in terms of their relationship. If we think of new students as novices and think of our goal to make them socialized members of a community of knowers, learners, and teachers, then we can better understand what it means to teach the social activity we call writing.

If the linear metaphor were apt and students were sojourners on the rising hill of development, then we would have a right to expect them to arrive at our door complete with all the baggage — known as basic skills — that they obtained in earlier courses. Why not, in that case, teach all the basics once and for all at the beginning of such a journey? But if students move, not in a line, but from community to community, then it is not at all clear as they arrive at a new community which items in the baggage they have collected along the way will be suitable to their new situation. This, I would suggest, is the more accurate and more humane view.

Moreover, this view has distinct pedagogical advantages. There are recognizable patterns of novice behavior, patterns which we can learn to anticipate and to which we can shape our teaching. This novice behavior is not confined to college freshmen. It is liable to show up at points of transition throughout a student's career — in the first years of high school and college, in the first courses in the major, in upper-level classes outside of the major. Though its manifestations can change as a student matures, novice behavior is as common for new graduate students as for freshman. It is evident in the medical schools or the law schools, even among the new lawyers at the most prestigious and selective firms.

I cannot here catalogue these patterns in much detail, but there is one common thread: the behavior of novices, as of the young, is characterized by relatively concrete procedures. When we give novices a writing assignment, they do not have an appropriate structure of knowledge against which to measure the writing task. They do not command the knowledge that gives background and definition to the writing of those in the discipline — not only "facts" but the terms of art, operational concepts, canons of relevance, patterns of association, characteristic argumentative gestures, and so on. So, novices look to whatever happens to be ready-to-hand. In the worst case, this ready-made structure is the relatively accidental sequence of their own thoughts. In better cases, the novice will, like Dorothy, latch onto a structure learned in other circumstances, never mind its appropriateness. But in most cases, novices will latch onto the most immediately available, external, "concrete" ordering principle. Most handy is the language of the

assignment itself. The paper will address each of the topics raised in the assignment, and in exactly the same order. The crucial, launching sentence at the end of the paper's introduction will inevitably paraphrase or even repeat the language of the assignment. Next most handy is the object the paper is about, usually a text. In a literature class, the novice student will be sure to summarize the plot at least once in her paper, and that paper will follow the chronology of the story. In a social science class the novice student who wants to address the fourth of Freud's six points on a particular topic will be sure to cover the first three before he gets down to work, and will take the trouble to wedge the fifth and sixth point into his conclusion.

Not surprisingly, this kind of novice behavior is often misread. Teachers in the disciplines typically respond as did Dorothy's social science teacher: they read novice behavior as a failure or inability to think. Seeing summary rather than analysis, they exhort the student to "go farther." Seeing the assignment replicated in the paper, they say the student hasn't thought through or taken command of the material. Seeing an alien structure — or not recognizing any structure — they say the student's writing is fuzzy, the paper unresponsive to the assignment. Seeing a train of loosely associated thoughts, they assume the student gave the paper little or no thought. Even more misleading are those aspects of novice writing that mimic basic writing. It is entirely predictable that many novices, because they are at sea in the discipline, will lose their grip on the so-called basic skills. A novice's writing will often be full of errors that result, not because the student does not control the "basics" of sentence grammar, but because of the cognitive stress of learning.

What, then, does all this add up to, and where does it leave the first-year writing class?

If writing is a social, disciplinary activity and grammar changes from discipline to discipline, then what can it possibly mean for students to learn to write in "generic" classes only about writing? Even if it is true that composition studies is a well-defined discipline (and sometimes I wonder about that), it is nevertheless also true that these generic writing classes do not ask students to write in or about the discipline of composition, or any other discipline.

By the same token, if "basic skills" are not the sort of thing that can be learned early, and once and for all, then we can hardly expect the first-year writing class to give students the basic tools they can then carry forward to new, more "advanced" writing situations. (And to the degree that we sell ourselves and those classes in that way, we set ourselves up for a fall.)

In this circumstance, what of any continuing use can we reasonably hold the freshman comp students responsible for learning? And what of any continuing use can we honestly assure our colleagues in other disciplines that they can expect our students to know? Since even the brightest and best-prepared students can be expected to exhibit novice writing behavior, then perhaps the burden of teaching "the basics" should be shared by all

those who teach in situations likely to elicit those novice responses. We might say, if it did not seem such a nightmarish prospect to our students, that you never escape freshman comp.

The lessons I draw appear to be chiefly negative and to leave writing teachers in a tight spot: they make our most populated course look unworkable. Even the attempts to remold freshman comp as writing across the curriculum for first-year students cannot succeed, for two reasons. The first has to do with the scope of the cognitive task of writing in several disciplines. Since learning to write in a discipline depends on learning the discipline, it seems a mistake to ask students to learn quite so much in their first college class. The second reason has to do with us. Given the current institutional structures within which we must now work, writing instruction does in fact belong to the humanities. Its teachers are overwhelmingly humanists, and they inevitably will teach what they know. That is why so many of the textbooks and the programs in writing across the curriculum involve students, not in writing in the disciplines, but in writing in the humanist tradition of *belles lettres* about a variety of topics.

More interesting are the new interdisciplinary attempts to introduce students in their first writing course to the diversity of the disciplines (see Moore and Peterson, 1986). These courses ask students to write and read in at least two (often more) disciplines, with special attention paid to the disciplines' different ways of proceeding. Such classes have much to recommend them, but still I wonder. When a student is a novice to college and a novice to the norms of the particular disciplines of the class, then the cognitive demands posed by this diversity are significant. Only the quickest, most supple, and best-prepared students are likely to escape being overwhelmed.

Most interesting of all is the route we have been reluctant to take, to rethink the institutional role of teaching writing. If writing is best learned in the disciplines, then maybe it is there — in the disciplines — that *all* writing teachers ought to be.

Works Cited

- Belenky, M. F. et al.
1986 *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic Books.
- Colomb, Gregory G. and Joseph M. Williams
1986 "Perceiving Structure in Professional Prose." In Odell and Goswami, 1986.
- Colomb, Gregory G. and Joseph M. Williams
1987 *Discourse Structures*. Technical Report #3. Writing Programs of the University of Chicago.
- Paigley, Lester and Kristine Hansen
1985 "Learning to Write in the Social Sciences." *College Composition and Communication* 36:2, 140-149.
- Fish, Stanley
1980 *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Inhelder, B. and Jean Piaget
1964 *The Early Growth of Logic in the Child: Classification and Seriation*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Inhelder, B. and Jean Piaget
1958 *The Growth of Logical Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kohlberg, Lawrence
1984 *The Psychology of Moral Development*. Volume 2. New York: Harper & Row.
- Moore, Leslie E. and Linda Peterson
1986 "Convention as Connection: Linking the Composition Course to the English and College Curriculum." *College Composition and Communication*, 37, 466-77.
- Perry, William G., Jr.
1970 *Forms of Ethical and Intellectual Development in the College Years*. 2nd edition. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Piaget, Jean
1954 *The Child's Construction of Reality*. Trans. by Margaret Cook. New York: Basic Books.